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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 001054

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [AM](#)

SUBJECT: DASHNAKS MANEUVERING FOR POSITION

REF: 04 YEREVAN 1678

Classified By: Amb. John M. Evans for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) The Armenian Revolutionary Faction (ARF) Dashnak party, as one of the central members of Armenia's governing coalition and allied with Minister of Defense Sargsian and President Kocharian, has been flexing its not inconsiderable muscle on the political landscape and pushing its message and agenda more aggressively. The Dashnaks have renewed their efforts to obtain international "Genocide Recognition" and to enhance their public profile leading up to the 2007-2008 elections (likely to be improved by a strong Dashnak showing in legislative elections in Nagorno-Karabakh June 19). As the party moves to sharpen its image, both within Armenia and abroad, Dashnak rhetoric is only likely to become more extreme, as the party looks to play a message that works with its target audience. End Summary.

"TURKEY SHOULD PAY"

12. (C) In marked contrast to President Kocharian's stated official GOAM policy which pursues diplomatic relations with Turkey "without preconditions," Dashnak international organization leaders again called publicly for holding Turkey "accountable" for the deaths of Armenians in the final days of the Ottoman Empire, during their June 3-4 meeting. Although the press characterized the Dashnak statements as a change in policy, National Assembly (NA) Dashnak leader Levon Mkrtchyan told us that there had been no change, but that the party was simply articulating its long-held position more forcefully. While noting that the President has the constitutional right to set foreign policy, Giro Manoyan, spokesman for the Dashnak party's international bureau, told us that they would raise the issue in upcoming coalition meetings. (Note: In separate meetings, former National Security Service Chief David Shahnazarian and current Presidential Security Advisor Garnik Isagulyan each emphasized the continuing close relationship between the Dashnaks and both Minister of Defense Serzh Sargsian and President Robert Kocharian. End Note.) Manoyan confirmed for us that the Dashnak position is that Turkey should be required to "return territory" and to pay compensation. (Note: Manoyan underlined the fact that this position is identical with the Dashnak-affiliated Armenian National Committee of America (ANCA). In a June 8 meeting with the Ambassador, local ARF bureau representatives lamented losing their "close contact" with the White House, and expressed hope that Washington policy makers would be seeking out their opinions on a wide range of issues. End Note.)

HOVHANISSIAN AN UNLIKELY PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE

13. (C) Senior Dashnak politician and Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly Vahan Hovhanissian appears to be burnishing his image as a potential presidential candidate for 2008. We see recent (positive) speculation about his candidacy in Dashnak-controlled media outlets and ARF sniping at one of the few serious presidential candidates, National Assembly Speaker and Orinats Yerkir (Country of Law) party leader Artur Baghdasaryan (and former protege of Minister of Defense Sargsian), as a indication that the Dashnaks may be testing the water. Hovhanissian, an archaeologist who suffered under the Soviets when his father defected to the West in the 1960s and was imprisoned along with other extreme nationalists under former president Ter-Petrosian's regime, commands a modest personal following. Although not tainted by excessive scandal, and able to take full advantage of the superior Dashnak party organization country-wide, Hovhanissian has only limited personal charisma and would be unlikely to do well in the elections.

N-K ELECTIONS A LIKELY BOOST TO THE DASHNAKS

14. (C) With the coalition led by the Dashnaks and Movement-88 (currently in opposition in N-K, and made up of many former Dashnaks) likely to win a plurality of seats in the upcoming June 19 "parliamentary" elections in Nagorno-Karabakh, we expect to see a stronger Dashnak hand in the governing coalition in Armenia, and also anticipate a hardening of GOAM positions in regard to N-K due to an emboldened Dashnak party. The current party of power in N-K, the Democratic Party of Artsakh (DPA), lost Dashnak support when the ARF left the N-K coalition following a tiff with N-K "president" Ghukasian in 2004 when he failed to "punish" an N-K general who had called for territorial concessions in order to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Shahnazarian told us that he expects widespread election fraud in the upcoming elections, and claimed that Sargsian, Kocharian and the Dashnaks wanted to ensure that Ghukasian was weakened enough to gain additional leverage over him and to keep him from contemplating a political role in Armenia.

COMMENT: DASHNAKS ON THE RISE

15. (C) As one of the few Armenian political parties with an ideology, the Dashnaks are well positioned to take advantage of an electoral landscape filled with parties linked to one or another uncharismatic leader and are positioning themselves to play a greater role in Armenian political life in the future.

BACKGROUND: WHO ARE THE DASHNAKS?

16. (SBU) Founded in 1890 in Tbilisi by Armenian nationalist and socialist revolutionaries who operated in the Caucasus and Western Armenia, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation Dashnaktsutyun (ARF) was first registered in Armenia July 2, 1991. The party was subsequently banned December 28, 1994, but the GOAM lifted the ban in 1998 (citing changed political circumstances). Key figures include Hrant Margarian, Vahan Hovhannisian, Armen Rustamian, Levon Mkrtchian, and Aghvan Vardanian. The ARF operates two newspapers, "Yerkir" (Country) and "Hayots Ashkharh" (The Armenian World). ARF controls 11 out of 131 seats in the National Assembly.

17. (SBU) The ARF-Dashnaktsutyun has been the most popular "traditional" party and the most active political force in the Armenian Diaspora. The Dashnak Party ruled the first Armenian Republic of 1918. In 1920, it ceded power to the Communist Party. Many Dashnaks fled Armenia, while others were repressed. The Dashnak Party was banned in Armenia during the Soviet period. The growth of glasnost during the last few years of the USSR allowed the Dashnaks to reestablish themselves in Armenia in 1988. Nevertheless, the main ruling body of the party, the Bureau, remains in Athens, Greece. From the outset, the Dashnak Party was the major opposition force to the Armenian government in power. On December 28, 1994, President Ter-Petrosian banned the party by decree. He accused the party of criminal activities, drug trafficking, assassinations, and fostering of terrorist groups (the so-called "Dro" clandestine organization.) The President's decree was followed by a decision of the Supreme Court to suspend the Party in January 1995 since it did not comply with the country's laws banning party membership of non-Armenian citizens. Several ARF leaders spent several years in jail (including Deputy Speaker of Parliament Vahan Hovhannisian and the President's National Security Advisor Garnik Isagulyan). After Ter-Petrosian's resignation in February 1998, then acting president Kocharian released ARF leaders due to the "changed political situation."

18. (SBU) The Dashnak Party is a socialist-nationalist party. It sees its ultimate goal as pursuing "The Armenian Cause," worldwide recognition of the Armenian genocide, and integration of Western and Eastern Armenia into one powerful state. Traditionally, party activities have not been transparent. In the course of its history, the party carried out a number of "revenge acts" against Turkish diplomats and other citizens. The ARF supports the independent status of Karabakh and any decision to promote its independence. Members of the ARF fought actively in the Karabakh conflict and the party had its own military units. Later, when Karabakh and Armenia formed regular armies, some of the Dashnak units merged with the armies, others were disarmed. The ARF remains a major political force in the Armenian Diaspora, and retains a wide support base in Armenia, especially among the youth.

EVANS